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Filling in gaps about the Pelton story

Press-bashing is fine when it is appropriate. And when the press violates the law, it is appropriate to bash the press. But if the Reagan administration is to have a credible policy regarding the leaking of classified information, it must also bash those who leak to the press. And this means not only firing government officials who leak but also criminally prosecuting them, as well as ex-government officials who leak.

Take, for example, the Pelton case, the case involving former National Security Agency employee Ronald Pelton and his revelations to the Soviets. According to a former top U.S. intelligence official who requests anonymity, the details about what Mr. Pelton gave the Soviets was not a story *The Washington Post* picked up off someone's desk. Not at all. As my source explained it to me, this story was "pushed and pushed hard" by individuals from two different places.

One pusher of the Pelton story was, allegedly, a former staffer on the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. And another pusher of the Pelton story, who knew "a great deal of it," was, supposedly, a person presently on the staff of President Reagan's National Security Council.

Thus, it is understandable that Washington Post executive editor Benjamin Bradlee was upset when CIA Director William Casey and President Reagan leaned on The Post and threatened to prosecute the paper criminally if it published all it knew about the Pelton case. I mean, I'd be upset, too, if one administration official fed me a story and then other administration officials threatened me with jail if I published it.

But, even so, Mr. Bradlee apparently has not told it like it really was regarding *The Post's* role in this flap. Writing in *The Post*, he says that last February, at an editors' conference in Florida, *Post* editors held a seminar on national security and the press. Among the attendees at this gathering was former CIA director Richard Helms, who was present, says Mr. Bradlee, "to give us the perspective of an old intelligence hand." As Mr. Bradlee tells it:

"Later, in a discussion with only four editors, Helms was told the story (the story *The Post* was told about Mr. Pelton's revelations to the Soviets — J.L.) and asked what were the chances that the Russians did not know the whole story. He (Mr. Helms) felt the chances were slim. He felt specifically that Mikhail

Gorbachev himself might not know, but he would certainly know if *The Post* published the story and his reaction as the new leader was hard to

predict, and potentially volatile. Helms gave no advice."

But is this an accurate rendering of what Mr. Helms said? Well, Mr. Helms tells me that this is "a partial rendering" of what he said. Is it true that he gave *The Post* no advice regarding the publication of the information it had about Mr. Pelton's revelations? Well, Mr. Helms says this is literally true but then he wasn't asked for any advice. He says: "Given the context of the conversation and the circumstances, the conversation from my side would seem to have indicated what my position was so I didn't have to voice my opinion."

When I ask Mr. Helms if he believes he left the impression with *The Post* editors that they ought not to run what they told him, orally, they knew about Mr. Pelton's revelations, he says: yes, "that's correct." He says

that indeed he did leave this impression "and that's what I intended to do."

In his piece in *The Post*, Mr. Bradlee also says that last April "an editor" of *The Post* met with former National Security Agency director Adm. Bobby Inman to discuss the Pelton story "in great detail." And Adm. Inman, says Mr. Bradlee, "felt it was unlikely the Russians were unaware of anything in *The Post's* story, but on balance argued against publishing."

But is this an accurate rendering of what Adm. Inman said? Well, Adm. Inman tells me that the unnamed *Post* editor was Mr. Bradlee. He says he met for about an hour-and-a-half at Mr. Bradlee's home. And he says that while what *The Post* finally published about the Pelton case was "a lot less than what was in their original story," still he would have preferred that *The Post* not publish anything at all.

As regards Mr. Bradlee's report-

ing that he, on balance, argued against *The Post's* publishing its original story, Adm. Inman exclaims, with a laugh, "On balance, hell," he didn't want any article published at all. In fact, Adm. Inman notes that in all previous dialogues with Mr. Bradlee, he always urged him not to print stories like the Pelton story.

In his *Post* piece, Mr. Bradlee wonders what all the fuss is about? He wonders if Reagan administration officials really believe that the people who run *The Post* would really betray their country?

He declares: "We don't allow the government — or anyone else — to decide what we should print. That is our job, and doing it responsibly is what a free press is all about." And he says the press, "and it alone," must determine what is in the public interest, "in a useful, timely, and responsible manner — serving society, not government."

But there is a very serious problem with this kind of hairy-chested, breast-beating approach to the question of the media and national security matters. And it is this: because the press never has access — and shouldn't have — to as much intelligence information as do our duly authorized intelligence agencies, the press — "and it alone" — can never decide what best serves the national interest of the country. And to argue otherwise is by definition irresponsible.

Furthermore, one doesn't have to intend to betray our country to betray our country and compromise its intelligence-gathering sources and methods. And what the Russians did or did not already know about what Pelton revealed is not the only question concerning his case. By all accounts, it is a good bet that the Soviets did know the details of what was in *The Post's* original Pelton stories. But this doesn't mean a lot of other parties hostile to our country also knew them. And the Soviets are not the only target of the techniques exposed by Pelton. So, what is to be gained by alerting these countries to the possibility that they might be similarly targeted?

But I end where I began. Press reporting of classified information which is illegal to reveal is a serious problem. When such information is reported, and the law is violated, those reporting it should be prosecuted. But much of this kind of information would never be reported if it weren't first leaked to the press by government or ex-government officials. And until the government cracks down hard and prosecutes these parties, it cannot be said that the government is really serious about protecting our secrets.